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Red Chorus

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Chapter 1

“Shin guntō .”

Paladin’s home sat on a hillside such that the porch seemed to project out from about the second floor. It gave the impression of a fisherman’s pier at low tide, except that instead of sand and silt below one could see the temperate undergrowth of virgin forest.

We stood there because his wife and daughters had decreed the afternoon to be one of Baking with a capital B — something in which his wife excelled and his daughters reveled. The girls shunned us outside since there was no room in the kitchen for superfluous cargo. They didn’t actually call us that, of course: it was more a suggestion we might enjoy the sunlight and pleasant summer day more out upon the porch.

This is how the two of us wound up standing on his porch, with me holding a samurai sword in the air and catching summer sun reflected off the water-patterned blade.

Paladin gave a small smile. Perhaps he was pleased to see the sword appreciated: perhaps he was pleased to see his good taste approved: perhaps it was something else altogether. “Are you quite sure?”

“No,” I told him honestly. I kept the sword in front of me and studied it closely, trying to read history in it. “What I know about sword valuation you could pack into a thimble with room leftover for your fingertip. It’s clearly—” I stopped midsentence. What had I just said about my skills? “It seems to be cheaply made. It didn’t have quite the right curve when it came out of the forge, so instead of melting it down and trying anew they mangled it into a new curve. Something like that. I don’t know.”

“Do you think it could’ve once been a *tachi*?” Paladin asked, his tone suggesting that he already knew the answer.

“The original curve? Umm. Maybe. But it’s not anywhere near long enough. Maybe

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they took a *tachi* and cut it down, I don't know. It's too short for a *tachi*, the blade's a bit too narrow for a *katana*, and the sort of chopshop work on it... I don't know, but if I had to guess I'd say *shin guntō*. World War Two wartime manufacture. The Imperial Japanese Army made these things like mad then. It's a neat historical relic, Paladin, don't get me wrong, but..."

I didn't know how to finish that sentence without sounding like a cad. I sheathed the blade and returned it, respectfully, to my friend. For his part Paladin just smiled, withdrew the blade, and set the sword upon the railing of the porch. "*Shin guntō*," he confirmed. "I had my own suspicions, you see, and made some inquiries through some people who follow these things. Yes, you're quite right. *Shin guntō*, World War Two, all that. The more interesting thing, though, is what it was before it became *shin guntō*. And maybe what it was before that."

As he spoke he carefully tapped out the pins that held the hilt to the sword. Perhaps he saw me blanch or heard my intake of breath. He smiled but didn't stop. "These parts are worthless crap from some wartime factory. Don't worry." In short order the hilt — the *tsuka* — had been removed, exposing the tang of the blade and the markings upon it.

I stood with my jaw agape. Wartime *shin guntō* emulated the swordsmiths of old by stamping a swordsmith's name on the *nakago*, the tang, but that's not what I saw. I saw a series of complex ideograms hand-chiseled into the metal with a painstaking care totally foreign to wartime manufacture. Whoever made this blade loved his creation and wanted whoever saw it to know this piece of steel was the culmination of all his art. That meant the blade was, at the youngest, over one hundred and sixty years old.

Once I found my voice I said, "It seems I was in error."

"Nonsense," Paladin said cheerfully. "You were exactly correct. *Shin guntō*, World War Two and all that. But it wasn't made during World War Two. Chris, this is a sixteenth century *tachi* that someone later tried to bend into a *katana*, probably during the Tokugawa Shogunate to comply with the new sword laws. That was the first time this warhorse was

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abused by his owner. Then during World War Two it was cut down to a more manageable size, had new furniture put on it, and went off somewhere else — Okinawa, Peleliu, Iwo Jima, somewhere — where a victorious Marine took it as a war trophy. Through a series of coincidences and good fortune, it's now sitting on the railing of my porch.”

Paladin was quiet for a moment, contemplative, as he stood there and appreciated the austere beauty of the naked blade. “I don't read Japanese. I wish I did. I'd like to know this good man's name, and tell him that five hundred years later we are still in awe of his creation.”

“But you can't ask around,” I said, understanding. “Because this is a national treasure of Japan. Wartime trophy or no it'll still be seen as that. And you'll get people asking you to sell it, or donate it to a museum. Then it's all about which museum to donate it to, and whether the Japanese should get it back. And four different families will clamor to own it here, saying that Uncle Bill brought it home from the war and pawned it to pay for his medical bills and that's the only reason they put it up for sale. And the Imperial Japanese Army kept records: they'd know who this sword was issued to and where he died, and that man's family...” I let the words trail off.

“Yes. Exactly.” Paladin's tone was grim as he reattached hilt to blade. “I think the old boy's earned a rest from battlefields and people making him into a totem for their cause.”

For a moment I was struck with sympathy for an inert object. “Haven't we all.”

Paladin gave a small smile. Not a bitter one, nor a cynical one, nor any other form of insincerity. “The difference, Chris, is that it's in our power to give the old boy a rest. If he were sentient and the tables were turned, perhaps he'd do the same for us.”

“What's Oldboy's name?”

Paladin shrugged as he placed the now-reassembled sword back in the scabbard, the *saya*. “I don't know. I haven't wanted to make those inquiries for fear of who would come looking. The name of a sword is even more dangerous than the name of a smith.”

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I shook my head. “You wouldn’t deny Oldboy a name, Paladin. You’ve given him one. What’s Oldboy’s name?”

Paladin gave another one of those reserved smiles. “Bashō.”

“You named him after a poet?”

“I think it will do fine for a placeholder until we learn his real name.”

From inside, one of Paladin’s daughters gave a shriek of amused outrage at something-or-other. Paladin and I looked over into the kitchen to ensure everything was all right, and upon that confirmation, remained out there in the sunlight with Bashō.

“I doubt this is the retirement the swordsmith imagined,” Paladin chuckled.

“It’s better than most of Oldboy’s contemporaries got.”

Paladin nodded. “There’s certainly that, yes.”

“Do they know? The girls, I mean?”

“Oh — in some sense, yes. They know it exists, they know it’s kept in a safe, they know it’s named Bashō. But they’re too young to really understand it, I think. In time. I hope it’s a very long time before they need to know about swords and those who carry them. For now they bake with their mother, and I grow fat on cookies.”

I laughed. “Not the retirement you imagined, either, is it?”

Paladin joined in my laughter. “Better than most of my contemporaries got!”

A few minutes later one of his daughters appeared at the kitchen window to tell us the cookies were cooling. Paladin and I traded one last laugh, then went inside to return Oldboy to his vault before heading to the kitchen to grow fat on cookies.

* * * * *

A few hours later four of us (Kestrel, the youngest, had already gone to bed) were sitting

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at the family table looking at playing cards. I dropped a stack of pogs on the table directly beside another identical stack. I pointed briefly to a card, then looked across the table to Bird. We made eye contact, she nodded her assent, and —

“— What’s that?”

Half the fun of family games night is corrupting the morals of youth. “Doubling down,” I told Libby.

“— What’s that?” she asked again, not unreasonably.

Bird, Paladin’s wife and Libby’s mother (Libby for ‘little Bird’, get it?), gave a reassuring smile but didn’t look away from the cards. “It means Chris wants to put another buck down, but he only gets one more card. Here you go.” Exercising her privilege as dealer she completed my deal by dropping a suicide king atop my spread, but at a right angle to the other cards. Sixteen showed: I was either going to have a really good day or a really bad one. I already knew which, of course, but I resolved to keep them guessing.

“But why does he want to do that?” Libby asked again. She studied her own cards (showing four and the hole). “Uh. I’m not supposed to tell you the hidden one, right?”

“You can,” Paladin said, as inscrutable as the Sphinx. “But it rather gives everyone else an advantage.” He talked that way. He still spoke the King’s English, full of ‘rathers’ and ‘bloodys’ and ‘quite’s, although he had a Belfast lilt.

Libby looked at her stack of pogs, then picked one up. “I’d like to double down, please,” she said primly.

I looked down at her bet and shook my head no. “That’s a Wonder Woman pog. That’s a buck. You’re only allowed to double your bet. You opened with two Daffy Ducks, fifty cents. If you’re allowed to double your bet, how much would you be allowed to put down?”

Libby gave me the death-glare of a just-barely-teen who hated being treated like she failed seventh-grade math. (Which she did, but only because she completely ignored her

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homework in favor of reading a high school algebra textbook instead.) “You never said there were limits on it.”

“Your mom told you that it meant I got to double my bet—” Against a fourteen-year-old my usual techniques of argument were useless. Paladin kept his mouth resolutely shut, perhaps for fear he’d fare no better than I would.

“No, she said it meant you got to put down another dollar—”

“—Libbyhoney, I’m sorry we didn’t tell you all the rules about blackjack when we started playing. But it’s okay to make mistakes. That’s how we learn games: we learn by doing.” Bird to the rescue.

Libby slouched back in her chair a bit, momentarily mollified. She made a show of looking through her pogs to find a pair of Daffy Ducks. “I’d like to double down, please,” she repeated, back to her usual perfect-little-primrose demeanor.

“And the lady doubles down to a…” Bird’s fingers danced on the deck, delivering a queen of hearts to her daughter with more panache than a Las Vegas dealer. “Lady of Blood and Romance.”

For his part, Paladin tapped his spread with a fingertip to denote his intention to stand. Since that closed things out — Libby and I each doubled down which precluded further cards, Paladin stood — it let Bird exercise the standard dealer rules about hitting until seventeen, and she closed on a twenty.

“Dealer shows the big two-oh, but a blackjack will take it. Chris?”

I turned my hole card to reveal an ace, then slid my two stacks over to Bird.

“Libby?”

“I’d like to fold, please.”

“That’s poker, dearest,” Paladin chimed.

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“Well, it should be blackjack. Wouldn’t it make more sense?” Libby insisted sourly as she turned over her hole card to reveal a ten. “Twenty-four. Two times two times two times three.” She’d been on a prime factorization kick ever since reading something in one of her algebra books. Then, looking over towards me and how I’d slid my stack of pogs to Bird, Libby tentatively did so herself.

Bird smiled approvingly at Libby. It was one of those motherly things I’d never quite understood, you know, how to tell a kid she’s done well without coming out and saying so and thereby patronizing a fourteen-year-old.

Bird’s eyes traveled to Paladin and they had some kind of conversation using only their eyes. “Oh, you cheeky English bastard—” It was her standard insult-of-affection. Paladin was about as English as Rasputin.

“Ten standing on an ace,” Paladin said matter-of-factly, revealing the Hand of Hands. “That’s a double payout on a Daffy, love, if you would.”

Bird chuckled, counted out the Daffys she collected from Libby and returned three Daffys — stake and winnings — to her husband. Libby sat there with a cross look.

“It’s a stupid game,” she finally said. “At least in poker you’re playing against other people. Here it’s...”

I looked over towards Bird and Paladin. We made eye contact and then I looked back down to my pogs, making a point of counting them out. “It’s what, Libby?”

“Dad won. But I never even got a chance to play against him. What fun is a game where you can’t play against the person who wins?”

“Your mom won,” I pointed out politely.

“Dad won,” Libby insisted. “He got the blackjack and double-payout on a Daffy!”

“Your mom collected two Wonder Womens from me, four Daffys from you and a Daffy from your dad. Two Wonder Womens and four Daffys, three bucks—”

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“Two Wonder Womens and five Daffys, three twenty-five,” Libby interjected.

“—or three Wonder Womens and a Daffy,” I acknowledged her correction with a faint nod. “She had to pay your dad back his initial Daffy, plus two more Daffys as winnings. Still leaves her two Wonder Womens and a pair of Daffys up.”

Libby was about to say something but caught herself short as she went through the math in her head. Then she looked over at Bird with a look that was equal parts anger and surprise and merriment. “You lost. But you won.”

Bird gave a slight smile. “Just because it looks like someone won, Libbyhoney, doesn’t mean they actually won. Can’t ever count someone a winner until long after the game’s done.”

Libby blinked another couple of times, then scowled around the table. My guess is she thought we were patronizing her somehow, although I don’t think any of us were. It’s been a long time since I was fourteen, though, and maybe I’ve forgotten how attuned a teenager can be to any hint that the adults aren’t taking them seriously.

“Why are we playing blackjack instead of poker?” she asked, swinging her legs as she sat to dispel some of her limitless energy.

I looked over at Paladin; he looked at Bird; Bird laughed. Paladin leaned forward as if to talk to his daughter *entre-nous*. “Dearest, for the simplest reason of all. Because we think it’s fun.”

“That’s it?” Libby asked, confused. “You’re not trying to...”

“You think we’d ever try to use blackjack to teach you something important?” Paladin laughed. “Dearest, we’re some clever fiends, your mom, Chris and me, but we’re not so crafty as to do that. Yes, there are lessons to be learned, but this isn’t school. Maybe you should learn to look out for the house, because the house always wins — but that’s about it, really.”

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Libby thought about this for a moment before shaking her head. She cut off further education by the simple means of bounding out of her chair and into her father's lap, closing in for a hug. "I like this more than blackjack. Blackjack's a stupid game."

Paladin laughed again, wrapped his arms 'round Libby, and let her stay there in his lap. "All right. All right. Chris, can you deal some Cards Against Humanity?"

For a moment I questioned the wisdom of letting a fourteen-year-old sit in on a game of Cards Against Humanity played by the three of us — but she's their daughter, not mine.

And hell. Fourteen years old or not, she was still more grown-up than some eighteen-year-olds I've known.

It took about three hands for me to realize that I was completely outclassed. Fourteen-year-old girls should not be allowed to play that game, if only for the severe cognitive trauma it creates in the adults around them.

She won.

It wasn't even close.

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After Libby went to bed we kept talking, talking as if we hadn't seen each other in years as opposed to the single-digit weeks it had been since my last visit to their corner of North Carolina. The family table was cleared and prepared for morning's breakfast, and we occupied ourselves with coffee and gossip. Shortly after midnight Bird pointed out the elephant in the middle of the room.

"Sweetheart." — don't infer anything from that, please, she's Southern, she calls everyone that, even people she doesn't like. It makes it hard sometimes for me to know whether I'm doing something right or whether I'm doing something stupid, but on this occasion I'm pretty sure I was on the right side of that divide. "Do you plan on telling us what's wrong?"

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I smiled and sipped my coffee. “It wouldn’t be very gentlemanly of me to lie and say nothing’s wrong, would it?”

Paladin harrumphed. Paladin did not drink coffee, believing it to be an abomination before God. A proper cup of tea is what’s fit for an Irishman, and his tea habit was of a magnitude normally associated with heroin addicts. He was drinking Darjeeling from a huge ceramic mug — a handmade, crudely-glazed thing of the sort children make at summer camp. His burn-scarred hands were wrapped around it to soak in the heat.

I noted the harrumph and offered Paladin a smile. Then I looked back towards Bird and offered in as neutral a tone as I could manage, “Elaine left me.”

Bird blinked.

Paladin blinked.

I shrugged. “That’s the big thing, I guess.”

Bird nodded slowly. “What happened?”

“She got wise to me.”

Silence ruled for three or four heartbeats. It felt like a lot longer. I finally said something, more than I was planning to say, just to make the silence stop for a moment. “She always wanted to know The Story, you know?” I said, making the capitals audible. “And it was just — it just — there’s only so long a Sword of Damocles can hang before it falls.”

“You’re carrying,” Bird pointed out, as if she was in the presence of sweating dynamite.

“Yeah. I’ve got the permits for it.” The Glock was in an inside-the-waistband holster at the small of my back. Beneath my windbreaker it was all but invisible. I wondered for a moment how Bird knew, but let it pass.

“Elaine just left you and you’re carrying,” Bird clarified. “Is that a good idea right now?”

“I don’t think it’s a bad one.”

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Bird nodded. Paladin, for his part, sat there and watched in silence. He was very good that way. Bird usually did the talking for both of them, and Paladin tended to do the observing.

“Is that all?” Bird didn’t want to accuse me of withholding, but she clearly thought there was more.

And there was.

“Nick’s dead,” I told Paladin. “Paul’s missing.”

Paladin breathed out quietly. “Oh, bloody hell.”

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Chapter 2

“Is that all?” It was inappropriate and as soon as Bird said it she knew it. One of the great trite truths is that when there’s bad news to be broken, someone will say something inappropriate. If we pretend like nothing’s wrong then nothing will be wrong. “‘Bloody hell,’ come on, that’s what you say when I climb into bed and my feet are cold.”

The last was directed at Paladin, not me — obviously. Paladin and I looked at each other. Without looking at Bird, Paladin said, “That’s the opening bet, love. I reserve the right to raise to an ‘oh, balls’ in a minute or two.” He kept his tone mild.

The two of them had been together long enough to understand each other’s subtexts. Bird was quiet for a moment, then reached over to squeeze Paladin’s forearm. I couldn’t quite read that, but that’s okay. Husbands and wives are allowed to have conversations to which other people are not invited.

She turned to look over at me. “Nick and Paul?”

“Rugby and Madman.”

She nodded. “The Regiment.”

Paladin took a draw off his tea. “The Regiment. Her Majesty’s Twenty-First Special Air Service, C Squadron. ‘Artists Rifles,’ we’re called. No apostrophes, please.”

“Artists Rifles.” I lifted my mug of coffee in a respectful salute. “As fine a band of malcontents as you’ll find anywhere.”

Bird paused a heartbeat to respect the moment. Then, “Did you know them?”

“Hard to know Rugby’s dead and Madman’s missing if I don’t know them.” I didn’t know why I said that. Maybe it was some kind of petty revenge for her infelicity a few seconds ago.

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Bird's normal cheer faltered for a moment and a frown threatened to emerge, but her smile won out before I could feel any sense of victory. "Did you know them?" she repeated.

"I was a corpsman in the United States Navy, Bird. I mean — sure, I saw them around now and again, but —" That was a lie, given I once spent a long hour and a half with my hand half in Rugby's gut holding a bleeder closed, but Bird didn't need to know that gruesome detail and I wasn't going to tell her.

"Foul play?" That was Paladin, his voice quiet. It wasn't a tone his family often heard. He trimmed his sentences down to the bare minimum of syllables and spoke in the softest tones when he was reverting back to an SAS colour sergeant playing hounds-and-hares in the Hindu Kush. Soft tones, but colder than tundra and harder than an ex-girlfriend's heart.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I think so. Yes."

"Précis."

I didn't know if Paladin was giving a command or making a request, but either way I was going to answer. "I was reading the *Guardian* and saw an article about a fatal stabbing in Knightsbridge. It was Rugby. They made it out to be just another random act of violence. I reached out to the club for more details. They had Bear get back to me. He tells me Madman left the club with Rugby last night. Bear says the cops think Madman's the culprit, but Bear disagrees because—"

Paladin gave a grave nod and seemed deeply unsettled.

Bird looked back and forth between us and seemed deeply confused. "— The club?"

"A gentleman's club—"

"A strip joint or a real English gentleman's club?"

"A real English gentleman's club. A place with standards. Paladin could probably get in the door if he were to wear a good suit and his Conspicuous Gallantry Cross. Madman and Rugby were at the club to talk to some people about joining up with a private military

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company. They had some drinks afterwards, left. Now Rugby's dead and Madman's nowhere to be found."

Bird took all this in. She looked back and forth between Paladin and me, then shook her head and put her face in her hands. "You two know how I hate this."

For a moment Colour Sergeant McKenna faded and Bird's husband Paladin emerged. He looked over at her with an expression of concern and support, then reached over to touch her shoulder. It was reassuring to see. It was normalcy. "Love?"

"The two of you," Bird clarified. "You have these conversations without saying anything."

I had to fight not to roll my eyes. Bird had for the longest time believed that there was a secret world that Paladin and I were part of, some secret understanding that we shared, something that she could never understand and would never be invited to. It was crap. Ironic crap, sure, in that she, who kept on having these completely subtextual conversations with Paladin, felt excluded from a subtextual conversation that Paladin and I weren't having... but crap nonetheless.

Paladin saved the day. If I had to talk I wouldn't have been able to keep the sigh out of my voice. "Love, the constables already have a narrative. Two men of Artists Rifles have too much to drink, they leave a club together, some old squabble resurfaces, they fight, one is killed and the killer runs and hides. It's as old as Cain and Abel. But that's not what happened and Chris knows it."

"But how does Chris know it?" She kept her head in her hands, and her voice sounded subdued.

"I don't know. But when our friend comes into our home armed, perhaps that's evidence he's aware of something he hasn't yet shared. Maybe something Bear told him."

I took that as a hint. "Bear found the body. Rugby bled out from a nicked brachial artery, but whoever did it slit his throat ear-to-ear postmortem to make sure. Rugby's coat was

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soaked with blood but the collar of his shirt was mostly dry. Bear says the throat was neater than Sweeney Todd. A single cut from a very sharp knife, all the way down to the bone. Both carotids, both jugulars, the trachea.”

Bird put her hands down, nodded a couple of times. “All right.” She thought about this for a moment and tried to put the pieces together. “So it wasn’t Madman because if it was a crime of passion, why do the throat?”

“Yeah,” I affirmed. “That’s the first thing that doesn’t jibe. What really bothers me is the neatness of the cut. If I’m Madman, and I’ve just nicked my best friend’s brachial artery in a drunken street brawl, and I’m so out of my head that I want to make sure he’s dead, well — maybe I grab his head, see my friend’s face, and it gets to me, it affects me. I killed him and now I’m carving him up. It takes me a few tries to actually do it because my hands are shaking and I’m at the brink of psychological collapse. Or maybe I’m so pissed off at him that I carve him up like a Christmas goose without thinking twice. Either way, the cut isn’t going to make a single tear of pride roll down the cheek of the Demon Barber of Fleet Street.”

Bird nodded. “The police will figure that out. I’m sure of it.”

“The Met will figure it out,” Paladin concurred, “once they’ve exhausted all possible avenues of delusion. They have a narrative and it will take time for them to discover it is a false one. Longer to have the courage to admit they’ve been chasing down a blind alley. It could be a while.”

Bird nodded again. “So. Where does that leave us?”

“One friend’s murdered, another’s missing,” I answered. “That leaves me carrying a Glock.”

Silence ruled until Paladin broke it by pushing away from the table and standing up. “Love, if Chris thinks going armed is a good idea I’m inclined to do likewise. I think we’re safe as can be here, there’s an entire ocean between us and them, but an abundance of

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caution never hurt.” He leaned over to give her a hug, to kiss her forehead.

Bird reached up to intertwine her fingers with his burn-scarred ones, smiling tiredly. “I claim dibs on the Browning.”

Paladin chuckled and squeezed his wife’s hand. “Condemn me to the Heckler & Koch, then. All right. I’ll be back in a moment.” He then went off up the stairs to their bedroom and the gun safe within it.

Bird watched Paladin go, then looked over towards me. It took an effort for her to put her customary mask of cheer on, but she did it like a trouper.

“Chris, can I interest you in another cup of coffee?”

I might not be able to decipher half of the subtexts she used when talking to Paladin, but when talking to me she resorted to using baby talk. She was really apologizing for being flip earlier. She was expressing her distaste for the world Paladin and I were once in, a place so messed up that we can talk about a friend’s brutal murder without batting an eyelash. She was grateful for us being in her life. She was telling me that their home was also mine. She was thanking me for bringing Paladin home alive from Afghanistan.

People think Paladin uses few words when he falls back into his colour sergeant mode. Paladin’s a piker compared to Bird and how she manages to put an entire book worth of meaning in just an offer of coffee.

“Thank you,” I told her. “I’d love some.”

By which I was hoping to tell her — oh, hell. Not even I understand what I was trying to tell her.

But Bird is Bird, and she understood it anyway.

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I have an open invitation at the Hawk’s Nest to crash there whenever I want. I’ve done so enough times that Paladin and Bird joke there’s a me-shaped outline on the family room

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couch. There's some truth to it, I guess. After finishing one last cup of coffee we all went our separate ways: Bird and Paladin to their upstairs bedroom, me to the downstairs couch. None of us were apt to sleep a wink, although this was due at least as much to our caffeine intake as to Rugby's murder.

My cell phone glowed brightly in the darkness. I stared at it for a few minutes, then tapped out a phone number. To hell with the hour. Elaine picked it up on the fifth ring.

"Chris, you'd better not be drunk-dialing me." She was already angry and I hadn't even said a word. Story of our relationship.

"Hey."

"Hey."

About ten seconds went by. I tried to find the words but failed dismally. There had to be some magic invocation of syllables that would let things work out between us, but —

— well. The truth is there didn't have to be. I just needed there to be. I should know better. After all, the universe has never shown much attention to my needs.

"Chris?"

"Yeah?"

"It's two in the morning."

"Yeah."

Hell. If I said anything at all, could that be any improvement on keeping my mouth shut?

"You called me."

I blinked, snapped back to reality. "Uh — yeah. Yeah, I did."

Bird would've been patient as a saint, but I got the idea Elaine was grinding her teeth.

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“What have you called me about?”

Ten years ago I spent half an hour holding Rugby's bleeding artery closed until he could be medevaced and today he's dead from a knife fight.

That's what I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her that I saved Rugby's life once upon a time. I wanted to tell her about Rugby, about how he got that nickname. I wanted to tell her Rugby wasn't just a guy I knew but someone I had a history with. I wanted to tell her I hadn't spoken to him in three years and I couldn't remember why or how we'd ever let it go that long.

I wanted to tell her that Nicholas 'Rugby' Harker's life meant something and because it meant something and because once upon a time I saved it my life meant something, too. I wanted to tell her that once upon a time I was somebody she deserved to be with and maybe I could be that again, and —

— So of course I said, “I forget.” I swallowed, tried to find what to say. “A friend of mine died. I just —”

I could hear the precise moment her voice softened. She gave a slight inhalation, whispered “Jesus.” She wasn't blaspheming. I could see her in bed, see her in my mind's eye, there making the Sign of the Cross. I could see her there, her pixie-cut hair dark as a raven's wing, her body lithe under the sheets. In my mind's eye she was wearing one of my old hockey jerseys. I doubted she was, but that's how I imagined her.

For a few seconds I just sat there on the phone with her. Well — with my imagination of her. I could hear her breathe, and in my mind I saw her chest slowly rise and fall.

“I just want to make sure you're all right,” I finally said.

“I am.” Her voice was gentle.

“I know this is all fucked up.”

“It is.”

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“I won’t call you again.”

“Chris.” Do they teach women that tone of voice? Is there some secret finishing school that Elaine and Bird both attended? That tone of voice that spells things out and lays down the law without ever being rude or dismissive or domineering? “It’s okay. This is okay. But you need to talk to someone, Chris. Call a priest, call the VA. Talk to someone about this.”

I thought I was talking to you, I thought. It took me a second to realize I actually said it aloud, and I hoped it didn’t sound as angry and bitter on the phone as it did in my thoughts.

“Chris. I’m sorry about your friend. I really am. But this isn’t the time and I’m not the person for it. Not any more.”

“I saved his life,” I finally managed to tell her. “In ’04. Helicopter crash. I kept him alive. And now he’s gone and—”

“Chris, you need to talk to someone else.”

“— and we’re all fucked up and I just want to try to unfuck something in my life and—”

“Goodbye, Chris.”

It took me another couple of sentences to realize I was talking to a dead line. Tears were streaming down my cheeks but I never noticed when it was I’d started crying.

I never thought I’d live to hear her call me ‘Chris’ so clinically. Not even the Navy ever treated me like that much of a number.

I rolled over onto my side and saw the faint light of the smartphone reflected in the eyes of Libby and Kestrel, watching me from the doorway.

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Chapter 3

Kestrel spoke first. “Are you going to kill us?” Her eyes were wide as saucers.

It took me a moment to gather my wits. During that heartbeat Libby looked down at her sister with the normal scorn and derision a fourteen-year-old shows an eight-year-old. “No, he’s not going to kill us.” She looked back over at me with a look best described as frustratedly apologetic. “She’s eight, and she watches too much CNN.”

“Better’n MSNBC,” I mumbled, still trying to figure out what was happening. Then, to Kestrel: “Kes, why would I ever do that?”

“I told you, she watches too much CNN—”

“Libby.” To her credit, Libby took the hint and hushed.

Kestrel took a half-step behind her sister, who rolled her eyes melodramatically. “PTSD,” Kestrel whispered.

“You think I have PTSD?”

Kestrel nodded.

“Kes, honey. Do you think your mom and dad would let me carry a gun in your home if they thought there was the slightest chance I’d do something to you or your sister?”

Kestrel’s voice was very quiet. “But what if they don’t know you have it?”

At this point I was thoroughly confused. I looked over at Libby, who gave me a you-told-me-to-be-quiet, now-look-where-you-are gaze.

I sighed. “Libby. Can you shed any light on this... ?”

“I told you. She watches too much CNN. She thinks everyone who ever served is about to snap and permanently close down a Taco Bell.”

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“Ah.” I looked over towards Kestrel again, forced myself to smile. “I don’t have PTSD, Kes, honey. Got myself checked out at the Veterans Administration and everything. Clean bill of health. Right as rain.”

Kestrel continued to stand half-hidden behind her older sister. “So why are you holding a pistol?”

Come to think of it, why *was* I holding a pistol? Why was the Glock in my hand? Christ. I must’ve taken it out of the holster when I was getting ready to lie down, but never put it on the endtable.

(Sure, my worse-but-wiser self said. Or maybe some part of you was thinking of checking out. The Veterans Administration just said you didn’t have a disability case. They didn’t say you were right as rain, and you know it.)

I removed my paddle holster from my waistband, then returned the Glock to it and set it aside on the endtable. “Because it was poking into my back,” I told Kes.

Once the pistol was put away Kestrel emerged from behind Libby. Kestrel walked over to where I was sitting on the couch, climbed up into my lap without so much as a may-I, and wrapped her arms around my neck as if she owned me. I almost lost it, but — you have to keep things together for little girls, you know? Even if it feels like the world’s coming apart at the seams, you have to keep things together.

Once upon a time I knew how to keep it together under the worst conditions, and now Elaine and Kestrel were threatening to completely ruin me. I never thought I’d ever say that getting narrowly missed by an RPG-7 was easier than domestic life, but...

... there you have it, I guess.

“Why are you crying?” Libby asked. Once upon a time Libby had Kestrel’s temperament, but fourteen is a hell of an age and estrogen’s a hell of a drug. Hormones and physical changes had altered her temperament, made her more brusque and blunt. Or maybe it was because her father was home from the war, and over the last couple of years

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she'd taken to adopting traits from him instead of just from her mom.

“Why are you crying?” she repeated. Impatient, too, if I hadn't mentioned.

“Elaine.” I hugged Kestrel, kissed her hair, rocked her on my lap. I wouldn't get the chance to do that very much any more. Libby used to climb into my lap, but nowadays she reserved that for her father and even then it was a special occasion. “We broke up.”

Libby moved laterally around the edge of the room, always facing me, until she reached a wingback chair. She entered it from the side, climbing into it more than seating herself in it. Her mom would've had a fit, but who was I to enforce that rule? “I see.”

“You're fourteen, Libby. Trust me, you don't.”

In the semidarkness I could see Libby's eyes flash with anger. She controlled it well, though. “Why do grown-ups think they have a monopoly on pain?”

Kestrel squeezed my neck again, entirely oblivious to the argument I was having with a fourteen-year-old. “It's not a monopoly on pain, Libby. I'm thirty-two and I don't 'see,' so I don't believe your vision's any better than mine.”

“Chris, if you're arguing with a fourteen-year-old, doesn't that mean you've already lost?”

I sighed, looked down at Kestrel in my lap. “Is she always this infuriating nowadays?”

Kestrel shook her head no, buried her face against my neck. “She saves it for when she's sure she can win.”

I rolled my eyes. “Christ.” Over in the wingback chair I could see a fey smile cross Libby's face, but she quickly hid it — probably for fear I'd notice.

“So Elaine left you,” Libby said as she turned to sit sideways in the wingback, draping her legs over the armrest. Someday those legs were going to break hearts far and wide, even if for now they seemed less ‘long and lean’ and more ‘comically mismatched to her body.’ “Why?”

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I shook my head no, then gave Kestrel another hug. Eight-year-old girls make great anxiety teddy bears.

Libby steepled her fingers in front of her, did her best to look sagely. “I see,” she repeated. Silence ruled for maybe ten or fifteen seconds. “I always liked her. The two of you were good together. Or so I thought.” Her voice had the strange cadence of someone reciting dialogue she didn’t truly understand. Or maybe it was the uncertainty of a young woman who was trying to have an adult conversation and wasn’t all that experienced at it.

“You always liked her, huh?”

Her eyes flashed over my way again, as if she was debating whether to hear that as insulting condescension or whether to hear it as someone struggling for words. To be perfectly frank I wasn’t quite clear on it myself.

“I always liked her,” she repeated. “She was nice to me.”

I let out a long exhalation. That much, at least, was absolutely true. “She was very nice to you, yes. And to Kestrel, too.” Kestrel didn’t say very much but if you didn’t include her in dialogue she got hurt, felt like she was invisible. I was rewarded with another hug.

“She never treated me like I was twelve. Not even when I was twelve.”

Including Kestrel a moment ago now had a payoff. “She’s telling you to stop treating her like she’s fourteen,” Kestrel helpfully volunteered.

“Kestrel.” For someone who was diverging so much from her mother, Libby pronounced those two syllables with an authority that would’ve impressed Bird.

“No, no,” I told Libby. “It’s okay. I’m a guy. Sometimes I need these hints.” I kissed Kestrel’s forehead, then whispered a private thank-you to her.

Silence ruled for a while. “Was it the sex?” Libby asked. My glower over at her must’ve been approaching full Bird intensity, because for just a heartbeat Libby blanched. She dropped her steepled fingers away from each other, wrapped her arms around herself, and

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for a moment appeared every bit as self-conscious as you might expect a fourteen-year-old to be.

Was it the sex, I thought. A heartbeat later I realized that I said it aloud. Again. That was becoming a really bad habit.

“I just...” Something had cracked Libby’s armor of casual disinterestedness. For a moment she looked confused, and then she shook herself and put her game face back on. “Chris, I know I’m fourteen. I know it, okay? You don’t have to keep reminding me. But I don’t know how I’m supposed to be a grown-up if grown-ups aren’t going to let me talk to them about grown-up things.”

Maybe ‘confused’ wasn’t the right word: there was a deep note of pain in what she said.

Kestrel squeezed my neck one last time, then slipped off my lap. “Would the two of you like some coffee?”

“Yes, thank you,” Libby answered Kestrel immediately. “Black.”

I looked over at Libby for a moment and wondered, again, how it was that any of us ever survived our teenage years. Then, to Kestrel: “Cream and sugar. Thank you, Kes.”

Kestrel smiled innocently. “Anything to get out of the S-E-X talk.” With that she bounded up the stairs.

Who could fault her? I more than half wanted to chase after her. But Libby had a point, too: if it wasn’t safe for her to try broaching these conversations with me —

Sometimes an adopted uncle has to grit his teeth and submit to the interrogation.

I sighed. “It wasn’t the sex,” I told Libby. “Don’t get me wrong, at the end there wasn’t much of that anyway. But that was a symptom of the problems, not a cause.”

She nodded faintly. “Were the two of you ... did you like the same things?”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘compatible,’ Libby. Yeah. At least in the beginning.”

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“So. Compatible kink.”

I blinked, shook my head no. “I wouldn’t have that discussion with your mom or dad, Libby. There are some things that gentlemen just don’t discuss so readily.”

Libby rolled her eyes. “It’s not like I don’t know what these things are. I mean, come on, it’s not like I haven’t seen Mom tied up like a Christmas—” She blinked. “Trussed up like a—” After faltering again she looked over at me. “Metaphor help?”

“That’s simile help. A simile is a comparison using ‘like’ or ‘as’. And no, I’m not going to help you come up with a bondage simile for your — *what the hell are we talking about anyway?!*”

“Rope,” Libby explained as if speaking to a slow child. “You think I haven’t noticed—”

“Your dad’s a fucking *hojōjutsu* expert. That’s about as far from kink as you can get, Libby.”

She blinked several times. “*Hojōjutsu?*”

“In feudal Japan they didn’t exactly have a ton of handcuffs, zip ties, or anything else a modern-day cop would use to arrest someone. So they developed this martial art, *hojōjutsu*, all about efficient ways to tie people up. *Hojōjutsu* is one of the traditional arts of the samurai. Your dad practices judo and jiu-jitsu, he owns a samurai sword, he practices how to draw the blade in a single perfect and unblemished motion — *hojōjutsu* is just part of the package. Don’t go about thinking that just because your mom volunteers to be his practice dummy that they’re... just... just *don’t*, okay?”

Libby blinked owlshly. This was clearly the first time she’d ever heard of *hojōjutsu*. “So it’s not for fun-time stuff?”

“Japanese bondage is something different, yeah.”

“What’s the name of that?”

“*Kinbaku.*”

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She smiled happily. “Thank you.”

“Oh, God. You’re going to Google that, aren’t you?”

“Not from here, obviously.”

I shuddered. Christ, fourteen-year-old girls were too smart for me. “Moving on. It wasn’t sex.”

“Okay,” she answered with feigned nonchalance. She’d clearly been relishing the S-E-X talk. I halfway wondered if I’d been like that at age fourteen, if I’d pushed limits the way she did. If so, I don’t remember it.

“Did you cheat on her?”

I shook my head no.

“Did she cheat on you?”

I shook my head no, but something in me answered differently. “Not that I know of.” Not that I could prove, really. Libby didn’t seem to clue to the different things that were being said, and I was grateful. I may have been forced to submit to interrogation but nobody said I had to underline things for my interrogator.

“So,” Libby pointed out. “It wasn’t sex. It wasn’t cheating. So what was it?”

I sighed. “If I knew, Libby, don’t you think I’d have fixed it?”

“I think you’d have tried to.”

I was quiet for almost a minute. To her credit, she let the silence pass. “Libby, the thing about breakups is ... nobody really ever knows why it happens. We like to think we can. ‘Oh, he cheated on her.’ Fine. Why did he cheat on her? What’s the backstory? Did she drive him away first? Was the relationship already dead? It’s hard to know these things. The heart gets tangled up in hundreds of different ways and suddenly two hearts are cut apart, but they’re still tied to each other with these lingering things. You can’t look at the

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two separate hearts and figure out why they split up. You have to look at the whole. And if there isn't any whole anymore, well." I shrugged. "Sometimes, honey, love just ain't enough. And that's all the truth I have about relationships."

She took all this in, then wrapped her arms around herself again for another self-hug. "Scary."

"Yes."

"Relationships are scary."

"Yes."

"Everybody talks about sex like it's simple. But it's not, is it?"

"Libbyhoney." It was a term of address that I'd stopped being able to use with her about three years ago, but here, in this moment, maybe I could. "Everything about the heart is big and complicated and confusing and you will always, always, get hurt in the end. But it's the only game in town, and it's a hell of a ride. And it's worth it. It truly is."

"Was it worth it with Elaine?"

I sighed, put my head in my hands. "I think it was. Is. She begs to differ."

"Why?"

She'd been asking me this question over and over through the night, and each time I'd deflected it. But it was late and I was tired and I just couldn't do it any more.

Everyone breaks in interrogation, given enough time.

"Because I scare her."

Libby paused. "She knows about you and Dad and—"

"—and Artists Rifles and everything else, yeah."

"But Mom isn't scared of Dad."

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“Your mom is a hell of a woman, and your dad’s a hell of a man.”

Libby shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t, either.” Libby and I had started to diverge: we were having two different conversations. She thought we were talking about her parents. I was talking about how I don’t understand how I stopped being the man I used to be.

“Do you think it can be fixed?”

“Fixed? No. It’s over, done.” I sighed and looked over at the Glock on the endtable. There was an answer there, just barely out of my mind’s reach. An answer that had nothing to do with suicide and everything to do with ending myself.

Once upon a time I was someone else.

Once upon a time I was with the Artists Rifles.

Once upon a time I would’ve been on a plane to London. The Metropolitan Police would spend a week coming to their senses and we didn’t have time to waste.

Why had I come here at all? Once upon a time I would’ve gone to London to engage the mission, not come to my preferred spot to hide from the world.

Once upon a time.

Why can’t once upon a time begin tonight?

“Have you ever heard someone talk about ‘once upon a time,’ Libby?”

She nodded. “Fairytale. Storybooks. Once upon a time long, long ago. Like *The Princess Bride* kind of stuff.”

I nodded, then rose from my seat on the couch. I left the Glock where it was. I moved over towards the exit.

“Chris?” Libby was confused. “Where are you going?”

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“London,” I told her. “Someone murdered a friend of mine. A friend of your father’s. And that means someone is about to discover not all fairytales are set long, long ago. Someone is about to discover the Artists Rifles are a grim fucking fable with a blood-drenched ending. Can you take care of the Glock, make sure Kestrel doesn’t get her hands on it?”

Libby nodded. Her eyes were wide as saucers. It was a look I’d seen before on fourteen-year-old girls: fear of the unknown.

I smiled at Libby because she deserved so much better than I was giving her. I walked over towards her, kissed her forehead, wrapped my arms around her shoulders for a hug. She didn’t object. Quite the opposite, really: she seemed reassured.

“Libby. I’m going to say this once, all right? You’re fourteen and you’re a better grown-up than most of the people I know. Right now you’re all elbows and knees and clumsy but in about two or three years you’re going to be a heartbreaker. And sometime after that, when you decide it’s right, when you decide to make that mad plunge into the world of grownup relationships — I promise you, Libby, you’re going to leave a trail of shattered men in your wake, happily shattered men, none of whom will be able to say two bad words about you. I promise you this. I promise.”

For a moment Libby was fourteen again, confused, disoriented, and not a little scared. It was reassuring. She felt safe enough that she could dispose of her game face for a few seconds. “Are you going to come back, Uncle Chris?”

I broke off the hug, smiled down at her. “I hope so.”

“You’re going to London to hunt a man,” she said carefully. “Is that what I should tell Mom and Dad?”

I nodded.

“He might not like being hunted, Uncle Chris.”

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I nodded again. “His problem.”

Libby nodded, swallowed visibly. She was scared and her eyes were still wide. “Come back soon, Uncle Chris.”

“I’ll try.”

“I’ll tell Kestrel you said you were sorry about leaving before coffee was ready.”

“Thanks.”

She tried to say something, stopped. I put my hand on the door, smiled at her, waited.

“This is what I hated with Dad, you know? I never knew what to say to him when he was leaving. I always thought that when I was grown-up I’d know what to say, but does that ever really—”

“—What did you tell him?”

“Just that I loved him.”

I nodded. “That’s a very good thing to say when a man’s going off to hunt other men, Libby. That’s very good.”

“It’s completely fucking inadequate!” I was briefly tempted to reprimand her for her language, but on balance it was a proper use of adult vulgarity.

“Yeah. But it’s the best we can do.”

Libby stared at me for a moment with tears welling in her eyes. Part of me was filled with sympathy for her. Sure, I wasn’t her dad, but she knew exactly what happened when Artists Rifles went off to hunt men. She saw the burns and graft scars on her father’s hands and arms every single day.

“Come back soon, Uncle Chris.”

I smiled. “Not going to tell me you love me?”

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She shook her head no, defiantly. “You’ll have to come back for that.”

I nodded. “Fair.” I moved back over to the wingback chair, kissed her once more on the forehead, stroked my hand over her hair. “I love you, Libby, but I’m not going to make you any promises I can’t keep.”

She nodded, reached up to give me one last hug. “Thank you for that.”

I smiled and turned to head towards the door. There was only one thing in my mind as I walked through it: someone murdered my friend and someone was going to pay. I let it fill my mind, let it populate all of my thoughts. I found myself smiling. There is truly no hunting like the hunting of armed men.

I did all of this because I was certain that if I spent a second thinking about Elaine or Paladin or Bird or Kestrel or Libby, that I’d have never been able to leave at all.

As I stepped out of their home and into the night air I heard Libby’s voice behind me. “Come back soon, Uncle Chris.”

I didn’t answer. My car was parked there in the driveway, and the redeye to Heathrow awaited.

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Chapter 4

We need to hop in the Wayback Machine for a moment. I'm getting too far ahead of the story. I need to tell you about Sean 'Paladin' McKenna, Paul 'Madman' Wechsler, Nick 'Rugby' Harker, Gerry 'Voodoo Fiend' Pruitt and a few other names. I'll forgive you if you don't remember them all.

Remembering is hard.

I'm going to tell you what you need to know to understand us, and I'm going to leave out everything else. What matters is this: in the early days of 2002, in an Afghan winter cold as the Chosin reservoir, I met C Squadron of Her Majesty's Twenty-First Special Air Service — or, as they style themselves, the Artists Rifles.

The meeting involved a lot of gunfire.

Never trust anyone who tells you about the geography of Afghanistan, anyone, even me. The maps are all wrong, always wrong — they call a group of three abandoned mud huts a village, or they'll say a village doesn't exist when there are families who live there who will kill you for trespassing. In 2002 we couldn't even rely on the maps to show us the roads. Maybe they were roads once upon a time, but once upon a time was a long, long time ago.

The armed forces are big on numbers and dispositions. Nine mud huts. Sixteen SAS organized in four patrols of four men each. One corpsman from the United States Navy who had been explicitly ordered not to be there. Each of the SAS carried a Diemaco rifle and three hundred rounds of ammunition: sixteen rifles and four thousand eight hundred rounds. The corpsman was unarmed: zero and zero. Finally, the good guys were on the wrong side of a Taliban-to-bullets ratio.

Patrol Two was caught between huts when the ambush started. The only reason they lived was because of Taliban *inshallah* marksmanship. But, you know, *allahu akbar*, one of their *mujahideen* was blessed to put an AK's bullet through the chest of Sergeant Sean

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McKenna. If it had been an inch off to the side it would've tagged his trauma plate, but it wasn't Paladin's day. Madman and Rugby grabbed Paladin by his MOLLE and dragged him into a mud hut as Voodoo Fiend charged in and pacified the resistance. I ran in after them to get some shelter from the hailstorm of Kalashnikov fire.

About two seconds later we discovered the walls weren't stopping incoming. Somebody on the outside had a DShK — a Soviet-era heavy machinegun, just ridiculously powerful — and the walls of the hut might as well have not existed. The only reason any of us survived was the long range and the *inshallah* marksmanship of the gunner. Still, Voodoo Fiend took a round somewhere in his head and went off to talk to the *loa*.

He died, in other words. He died before I even found out his name. It wasn't until that evening I knew him as Gerry Pruitt, married father of three. At that instant he was just Voodoo Fiend, the English wanker who owed me twenty-five dollars from the previous night's poker game.

There are many who would, in my shoes, claim “the training just takes over.” If you hear someone utter this please denounce them as liars. Sure, the training takes over (if you're smart enough to let it), but that doesn't do anything to take away the fear. The best you can do is to let your body do what you've trained it to do, and watch as somehow your body acts in ways much braver than you are.

My body went over to Voodoo Fiend's body. Training says to look for an entrance wound, which is why in my nightmares I have the surreal experience of looking for an entrance wound on the neckstump of a man decapitated by a heavy machinegun. After a moment my body triaged Voodoo Fiend's wound as not survivable and abandoned further care. My body kept low to the ground to belly-crawl over towards Madman and Paladin. As it crawled, I wondered how it was doing such a good job keeping it together while my brain was screaming in abject terror. I watched bullets pierce the mud walls, watched light stream in through the holes they made. For a few seconds I thought about things, and that thinking made my body useless.

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Madman grabbed my shoulder and snapped me out of it. “Do your fucking job!”

That’s combat leadership for you. Remind someone of their duty and let their duty do the rest. I shook myself and turned to look at Paladin, who was already ashen from blood loss. The round had pierced his right lung in a classic haemopneumothorax. That’s medic-speak for “sucking chest wound.”

I smiled down at him like nothing was wrong and like I knew what I was doing. Madman helped me rip off Paladin’s armor to let me get at the wound. I started talking a mile a minute trying to sound like I wasn’t hanging onto my courage by my fingernails. “Goddamn, Voodoo Fiend checked out still owing me twenty-five dollars!”

Complaining about a dead man’s outstanding gambling marker is pretty low class, I know, but you see what your bedside manner is like when DShK rounds are streaking so close to your face that bow shock ripples on your cheek and your eardrums threaten to rupture.

Madman had treated these sorts of injuries before. He knew what to do probably better than I did. The short version is you have one problem from two sources. Blood and air are entering the pleural linings of the lungs, which reduces respiratory ability by increasing amounts over shorter and shorter increments of time. Whether it’s the blood or the air that ultimately kills your guy doesn’t really matter. You have to intubate the lung to drain the blood and allow the trapped air to escape. There’s a special chest tube for the job and it’s so simple a child can do it... assuming you have a child who can make his hands stop shaking. Me, I find it kind of difficult, but Madman made it look simple. He had it so in hand that he could joke and riff as he assisted.

“Dollars? Sod that! Quid! We’re English and we pay debt in the Queen’s coin! ’Cept for the Mick here, who would be objecting loudly were he capable of speech! Is that the going rate for the River Styx nowadays, twenty-five dollars?”

“Cash in advance!” We were yelling because Rugby was firing his Diemaco a few feet

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away from us. War movies never accurately show just how loud battlefields are. Dying is easy, living is hard, and OSHA strongly recommends hearing protection.

Madman approved of how I was treating Paladin, apparently, because he picked up his Diemaco. He cuffed Paladin lightly on the head. “You’re forbidden from dying,” he told his friend. “You can’t pay the ferryman, so you park your arse on this side of the river.” He grinned at Paladin, then low-crawled over to join Rugby.

They made it all look so easy.

Four minutes later I was in the back of a medical transport sandwiched between a headless corpse and a man well on his way to being a headed one. Rugby was driving, Madman riding shotgun — I would say ‘literally,’ but that’s not quite true, as a Diemaco rifle isn’t exactly a shotgun, now, is it? Loud as one, though.

When we arrived at the aid station Paladin was still alive.

That’s why Bird loves me. It has nothing to do with me: it has to do with her being absolutely besotted with Paladin. When Paladin was bleeding out Madman and I saved him. When Paladin was nine parts in ten a corpse we refused to let the tenth part cross the river. Kestrel exists today because of what we did that day. I could run a kiddie porn ring out of an orphanage and Bird would still welcome me into their home.

That’s why Paladin loves me. It has nothing to do with me: it has to do with him being the kind of family man that generally only ever appears in bodice-ripping romance novels. He got to come home to his wife and daughter, got to enjoy the living hell out of making another daughter, got to see his legacy unfold with each day that passed and each decision his daughters made. I could call him an Englishman every day of the week and he’d just laugh about it and remind me the couch was always available.

As I sat there at thirty-five thousand feet crossing the Atlantic I wondered: why wasn’t Paladin with me? Rugby’s gone, Madman’s missing. You’d think Paladin would be out of his mind, wouldn’t you?

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What was I getting into?

* * * * *

About thirty minutes later an attendant came with the requisite packet of oversalted pretzels. She was pretty, I guess. Slender, shapely and Scottish has always been a thing for me ever since I was a teenager masturbating to Shirley Manson. Maybe that's why I remember our conversation.

"Coke." I peered at her nametag and appended, "Tara." It was one of those names that's so stereotypically Scottish it had to be an affectation for the tourists. I didn't let on that I knew.

Her completely professional smile dashed any hopes I might've had for something more. "Certainly, sir."

"Chris," I lied, sort of. When a man's taken in by a pretty woman it's hard for him to say so much as "hello" with true honesty.

"Chris." It wasn't a conversation we were having so much as she was parroting back my words to avoid a conversation. She opened a can of the Great American Beverage, poured a shotglass worth over a handful of ice and slipped it over towards me. "Enjoy. Please don't forget we have wifi on this flight for quite reasonable rates." She gave another one of those practiced *no I will not fuck you* smiles and moved on to the next passenger. Long experience had apparently taught her to spot liars.

What the hell. There was no one beside me, so that gave me room to spread out and open up a laptop. One instance of credit-card highway robbery later and I was online. My usual communications opened up: email, a couple of IRC channels, an instant messenger account or three.

I wasn't expecting them to all blow up at once.

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(8:24:22 AM) Ferryman [~chris@hawksnest.org] entered the room

(8:24:23 AM) ***Grimes sits at attention ... Ferryman in the bar!

(8:24:23 AM) ***Gridley prrts 'hello' to Ferryman

(8:24:32 AM) ***WordOfBird slaps Chris.

(8:24:40 AM) Ferryman: Hello to you, too, Bird.

(8:24:50 AM) WordOfBird: What the hell are you doing?

(8:25:03 AM) WordOfBird: Leaving my daughter with a loaded pistol?!

(8:25:15 AM) WordOfBird: Leaving us in the middle of the night?!

(8:25:30 AM) WordOfBird: Traumatizing LittleBird by letting *her* be the one to tell us?

(8:25:40 AM) WordOfBird: *What* *the* *hell*, Chris?!

* * * * *

Looking over email I saw I had four from Paladin, I'm certain all in escalating levels of ire. I quickly deleted them sight unseen. Then Skype flagged incoming calls and IMs from friends I had in common with the McKennas, and...

I started shutting down communications channels. When all you're getting is static there's no point in talking.

* * * * *

(8:28:11 AM) Ferryman: Is Paladin around?

(8:28:14 AM) WordOfBird: No.

(8:28:26 AM) WordOfBird: He's calling Heathrow to get you turned around at customs.

(8:28:34 AM) Ferryman: ... good luck with that.

(8:29:07 AM) WordOfBird: You're not thinking clearly, Chris. You need to leave this to the police. Yes, it sucks that they're chasing down something that's obviously wrong, but investigation is a *process*.

(8:29:30 AM) Ferryman: I don't plan on interfering. I just want to ask a couple of questions.

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(8:29:40 AM) WordOfBird: That's what cops call 'interfering,' jerk.

(8:29:55 AM) Ferryman: This is about the Glock, isn't it?

(8:30:10 AM) WordOfBird: No. This is about everything you've been doing in the last day. The Glock is just part of it.

(8:30:11 AM) Raubritter [~bonsoir@noir.net] entered the room

(8:30:15 AM) WordOfBird: Give us the room, Rob.

(8:30:17 AM) Raubritter left the room (quit: Quit: Leaving).

(8:30:31 AM) Ferryman: I have to see him in the ground. Nick, I mean. I have to. I owe him that much.

(8:31:10 AM) WordOfBird: Why is it that because *you* saved *his* life, you owe him a debt? And yes, I got told about the crash and the bleeder.

(8:31:30 AM) Ferryman: I don't have time to explain.

(8:31:50 AM) WordOfBird: You're at 35,000 feet and aren't landing for two hours. Try me.

(8:32:10 AM) Ferryman: No.

(8:32:25 AM) WordOfBird: God *dammit*, Chris. Can't you tell when people are trying to *help you*? Why won't you *let us*?

(8:33:01 AM) WordOfBird: Are you there?

(8:35:05 AM) WordOfBird: Chris?

(8:35:20 AM) WordOfBird: Chris, come back.

(8:35:35 AM) WordOfBird: We love you, we're scared about you, and we want you to come back.

(8:35:58 AM) WordOfBird: I'll talk to Elaine. I promise you. I *promise* I'll talk to Elaine.

(8:36:15 AM) WordOfBird: The story's not over, Chris. Come back.

(8:36:27 AM) Ferryman: I don't know how to explain it, Bird.

(8:36:50 AM) WordOfBird: Saying that's a start. What's the next sentence?

(8:37:15 AM) Ferryman: I think it's, "Goodbye, I love you all, I'll be home in a week."

(8:37:25 AM) WordOfBird: Chris?

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(8:37:27 AM) Ferryman left the room (quit: Quit: Called to make a delivery)

* * * * *

I closed the lid of the laptop and sat there listening to the roar of the engines and the screaming of a child a few rows ahead of me. Somehow it didn't really reach me.

I knew that I should be crying, I knew that I should be broken down and in tears.

I knew that once upon a time — six hours ago — I would be.

I wanted to be the man I once was, but now that I was thinking like that again I finally got around to asking myself: is that really something I should aspire to?

I would've given a different answer six hours ago. Now, though, I turned to look out the window. I had two hours until Heathrow, and all I had to do to keep my game face on was to not think of Elaine.

Whoops.

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Chapter 5

Getting through immigration hadn't been a problem, but as I made my way through the crowds and towards the ground transportation center a constable was looking for me. She was standing on a chair with a smartphone in one hand, looking at a photograph on it every few seconds before letting her eyes go back to scanning the crowd. Given what Bird had said about Paladin's call to the authorities, I figured it was a good bet she was looking for me.

I could've just turned and walked away, but that's a losing game. When someone's intent enough to send a cop after you they're usually not inclined to just give up if at first they don't succeed. Sooner or later you're going to have to deal with them, and it may as well be at a time of your choosing rather than a time of theirs.

Besides. She was pretty, or at least, would've been. Police uniforms are meant to convey a bland sense of inoffensive uniformity. It's hard to look good in any sort of uniform other than full dress blues. She looked almost stereotypically Scottish, with ringlets of red hair visible beneath her bowler hat, and I was sure she'd look darn fetching in anything except that incredibly ugly blaze-yellow windbreaker they wear —

“Do you have a sister, a flight attendant named Tara, who was on this flight?” I asked as I walked up to her. “Because really, the similarity is —”

She halted me with a hard glare. She was about to say something, then looked back down at her smartphone and again back at me. I smiled. She regarded me again the same way a soldier might look at a new boot, then climbed down from the airport chair she'd been standing on. She came up to just under head level on me.

“Mr. Holloway.”

I nodded.

“Come with me, please.”

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I cocked my head over in the direction of an overpriced and noisy airport bar. “Can it be over a drink?”

“No.” She turned and began to walk away, expecting me to follow.

I grimaced. “Do you mind if I get a drink?”

She stopped, turned around, regarded me again. “You want to take a beer into an interrogation room.” It wasn’t a question when she said it, how she said it.

“Figure it’ll improve the experience. Besides, Old Speckled Hen,” I said, as if the brand by itself explained everything.

“Yes, I mind if you get a drink. No, you may not bring beer into the interrogation room. And Old Speckled Hen is an ale.” She gave me a capital-L Look. “Follow along, please.” With that, she began walking with a brisk pace. Our height difference meant it was no trouble keeping up, though.

“In America the police would have me walk ahead of them, in case I decided not to follow, or tried to flee.”

She didn’t bother looking over her shoulder at me as she answered. “Normally we would as well. But you approached me, Mr. Holloway, and I imagine that means you’re of a mind to cooperate. A mindset that I appreciate, as it means you’re not keen on bolting and we can keep this more civil than such conversations sometimes degrade into.”

The interrogation room wasn’t far from Customs; it was maybe a minute’s walk at most. We reached it, she opened the door and ushered me in. I wish I could say it looked different, that it looked somehow ‘European,’ but the reality is it had badly-worn carpet, bright white walls, a small wooden table and a pair of chairs. It wasn’t the kind of Detroit-grade industrial decay one might expect of an interrogation room from seeing the movies, nor the kind of gleaming and pristine environment one might expect from seeing other genres. It was, well — plain.

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I took a seat, as did she. She took off her bowler, revealing the aforementioned riot of ringlets, but left that absurd blaze-yellow windbreaker on. She went fishing in her pocket for her warrant card and presented it to me, identifying herself as Rebecca Lawson, Police Constable.

“Do you know why you’re here, Mr. Holloway?”

“No — don’t give me that look. I just got off the plane. I haven’t been in England long enough to get into any trouble.”

She nodded, then reached into her jacket to extract a notebook and pen. She started making notes as we were speaking but I couldn’t see what they were. “It’s my understanding that you’re here to attend a friend’s funeral, Mr. Holloway?”

“I am. Nick Harker.”

She paused a half-heartbeat. “Why do I know that name?”

“He was murdered a couple of days ago. It was in the *Guardian*.”

She nodded and her lips pursed into a faint moue. “I’m sorry about that, Mr. Holloway. I think I remember reading about it now. When is his funeral?”

“No idea.”

Her copper-red eyebrows raised slightly. “You don’t know?”

I shook my head no. “The *Guardian* didn’t say. I expected it to be soon, so I grabbed the first flight I could to get over here. I haven’t even called work yet to tell them I’ll be out. I didn’t want to run the risk of missing his services.”

She nodded slowly as her pen scritchd lightly across paper. “I’d be happy to find that out for you, Mr. Harker. The investigators surely would know.”

I nodded. “Thank you, officer. That would be kind.”

“Constable,” she corrected me, but not unkindly.

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“Constable.”

“You mentioned employment. What is it you do, Mr. Holloway?”

I didn’t answer for a few seconds. I didn’t want to answer at all, but not answering would make more trouble, and forcing her to draw it out of me would make only slightly less. “I’m unemployed.”

She frowned slightly. “Did I misunderstand you when you said you hadn’t called work yet to tell them of your absence?”

“It’s complicated.”

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. “I don’t know how familiar you are with police work, Mr. Holloway, but whenever someone tells me ‘it’s complicated’ I begin paying particularly close attention.”

I wanted to sigh, or maybe scream, but neither would’ve helped me out. “I’m sort of the gofer for Blue Holler.”

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar with ... any of that, really. Blue Holler?”

“It’s a small town in deeply rural Virginia. Valleys get called ‘hollows,’ like—”

“— *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*?”

I blinked. “I didn’t think Washington Irving was part of the A-levels.”

At this point the ghost of a smile turned into a genuine laugh. It didn’t last long. Part of me rejoiced. Interrogation is all about rapport, on both sides of the equation. The interrogator wants you to like them, to trust them, so you’ll be less likely to deceive. You want the interrogator to like and trust you, so that your deceptions will be less likely to be challenged.

She shook her head. “It’s not. I don’t think I read a single American author in school, to be honest. Well, not one that was assigned reading as opposed to extracurricular. But

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I've been an avid fan of suspense and horror since I was a little girl. So. 'Hollow' for 'valley,' and from there to ... 'Holler'?"

I nodded. I'd made her laugh once: now I had to play nice, or else she'd figure out I was reading out of the counterinterrogation playbook. "Right. Blue Holler. It's a small town nestled in the Blue Mountains of Virginia. The place is so out of the way it's not even on Google Maps. I think there's a Blue Holler in Kentucky somewhere, up near Nolin Lake, but ... sorry. You're probably not interested in Appalachian geography."

"Mr. Holloway, I understood maybe five words of what you said. You come from a small town named Blue Holler in deeply rural Virginia. Correct?"

I nodded. "Kind of near Roanoke. Sixty miles away or — uh, a hundred kilometers or so."

She made another businesslike nod. "We still understand the English system, Mr. Holloway, but I appreciate the conversion. Now. What is it you do in Blue Holler, Mr. Holloway, that leaves you employed while being unemployed?"

"Everything, pretty much." She gave me a hard look and I said more. "Blue Holler can't afford much in the way of city services. I volunteer with their fire department, with their emergency medical service, and I serve as a volunteer deputy sheriff. When Blue Holler doesn't need any of that I tend the city park. I garden. And, uh, I coach the Little League and girls' softball teams."

She blinked. "You're a professional volunteer?"

There was more than a hint of incredulity there. I didn't know if she did it on purpose to make me bristle or if it was just the kind of crap I get to deal with whenever I talk to people who haven't ever been to a small town. Doesn't matter much anyway. I bristled. "No, I'm unemployed. But if I'm taking the dole, don't you figure I ought to do something productive with my time? It's as much for me as for them. If I was stuck around the house all day I'd hang myself in a week."

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She raised her hands slightly, palms outward, and spoke in a conciliatory tone. “I’m sorry, Mr. Holloway. Truly, that’s a — a commendable attitude, one I wish more of our citizens shared. I hope you understand, though, how unusual it is.”

I nodded. “I do.”

“How did you pay for your plane ticket, Mr. Holloway?”

I took a deep inhalation of breath, let it out slowly. Christ, I hate dealing with smart people. They always ask the questions you really don’t want to touch.

“Mr. Holloway?”

I took another breath, exhaled. “My ex-girlfriend.”

Her brow furrowed slightly. “Your ex-girlfriend paid for your flight?”

“No. Kind of — yes. Yes.”

“Well, which is it, Mr. Holloway?”

“We had a joint checking account when we were together. We broke up three days ago. She moved out. She hadn’t — I mean we hadn’t —”

“Agreed on a disposition of funds?” she offered.

“Yes. That. She makes good money. There was enough in the account to pay for plane fare and cover incidentals.” That was a lie, too, sort of: although there was still some left in the account I wasn’t going to touch it. I’d rather sleep on a park bench than pay for the roof over my head from Elaine’s purse.

“Did you have her permission to use her money in such a fashion, Mr. Holloway?”

“No.”

A sculpted brow arched slightly. “One might therefore say you stole the money for your trip here.”

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“Is American financial law within your bailiwick, Constable Lawson?”

She paused. That response had stung a bit, for whatever reason. “No. I hope you can understand if I think it does not reflect well on you, though.”

“I have to see Nick’s funeral. If Elaine wants to press charges when I get back to the States that’s her right, but I have to see Nick get laid to rest.”

“And to stare in mute rage at your white-knuckled fists as you contemplate your powerlessness to bring his assailants to justice.”

“I already hate myself enough without you reminding me of what I have to look forward to, Constable.”

A moment passed between us before she canted her head slightly forward. It could’ve been an apology. I decided to err on the side of being a decent human being and give her credit for making one. I nodded in return, and she did not ask me to elaborate upon what my nod meant.

After several more seconds she asked, “Why do you think you’re here, Mr. Holloway?”

“I don’t know.”

“I didn’t ask what you knew. I asked what you thought.”

I shrugged. “I genuinely don’t know.”

“It’s come to the Met’s attention that you might take it upon yourself to try and find Mr. Harker’s assailant — or assailants — yourself. Hence my ... rude remark a moment ago.”

I was silent.

“I take it you’ve no such plans?”

“Constable Lawson, if it was your friend who got murdered, wouldn’t you wonder what happened? Wouldn’t you ask a few questions? Of course you would. But you wouldn’t get in the way of a police investigation, you’d respect the law, and during the service you’d

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clench your fists and look down at your white knuckles and tell yourself that if only you could... and that's all I plan on doing.”

“That’s all you plan on doing.”

“Yeah.”

“White knuckles, ‘if only I could...’”

“Haven’t we already talked about this?”

“Why do I have trouble believing you, Mr. Holloway?”

You’re a beautiful woman, which means you’re keenly aware of the lies of men. So, of course, I lied. “Like most men, I have no idea what’s going through a woman’s mind.”

She glowered at me a moment, then sighed. “I have trouble believing you, Mr. Holloway, because a man who will leap on an airplane, fly across an ocean, land, all without knowing when his friend is being buried, without letting his employer know of his absence, while stealing thousands of quid from an ex-girlfriend, is a man who very clearly is emotionally invested in his friend’s demise. That kind of emotional investment can lead people into foolish decisions.”

“So you’re here to make a decision about whether I’m prone to foolish decisions?”

“Something like that.”

“And if you think I am, then I’m ... what, on the next flight home?”

She nodded.

Anger welled up in me, quick and sudden and harsh. “Is this about—?” I barked. “Is this about people thinking I’m suddenly going to go all unhinged? Good Christ. No. I’m not going off the reservation. I don’t have a history of that, not in uniform, not in civilian life. I have a freaking condition, but I’m not some Goddamned time bomb!”

Somewhere in that outburst I rose to my feet; at the end, I took my seat again. “I’m not

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a time bomb,” I told her again, more slowly, “but I promise you, if everyone was looking at you like you were about to go off, you might start to feel pretty angry yourself.”

She nodded and let a few moments pass. She then said mildly, “Mr. McKenna mentioned you had some trouble with post-traumatic stress.”

“I’m not a disability case. I’m fine. I just get — sometimes it all just gets to be too much.”

“What are your symptoms, Mr. Holloway?”

I scowled at her, then closed my eyes and forced myself to breathe. “Irritability. Obviously. I don’t like crowds. I don’t like enclosed spaces. Too much like the interior of an armored personnel carrier: I keep waiting for the IED to go off. I don’t like being out in the open. Too much like being out in the field: I keep waiting for the sniper to fire.”

The pen scritchd a few more times. “Do you ever get confused as to where you are?”

“You mean, ‘do you ever think you’re back in Afghanistan?’ No.”

She shook her head. “Do you know where you are now?”

“Heathrow Airport. London. Near to customs and immigration control.”

She nodded. “Mr. Holloway. A friend of yours is deeply concerned about you, and called some well-connected friends. Those well-connected friends called my supervisor, who in turn sent me down here to see you and to gauge whether you’re keen on misbehaving or whether your intent really is what you claim — attending your mate’s services.”

I nodded. Nothing was a surprise so far.

“It is my intent to report to my supervisor, who in turn will tell those above him, who will ultimately get word back to your friend, that you seem to be in command of your faculties and I can see no reason to put you on a flight back home.”

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I nodded again. “Thank—”

“No. Don’t thank me yet. Mr. Holloway, I encourage you to clench your fists as hard as you like at the funeral service. But if you get into an altercation, however mild... if you interfere with our investigation, however minimally... if you look left, right, left at a zebra crossing instead of right, left, right... then I will personally arrest you, personally drive you here, personally place you on the next available flight to the United States.”

I could have protested, but really, what good would that have accomplished? “I understand,” I told her. Because really, I did.

Her voice softened slightly. “I am sorry about Mr. Harker.”

I nodded. “So am I.”

“Were you a soldier, Mr. Holloway?”

I shook my head no. “Sailor. Navy corpsman. What you’d call a Combat Medical Technician. The Royal Marines have their own medical service, but United States Marines get their medics from the Navy.”

“And Mr. Harker was with the SAS, wasn’t he?”

I nodded.

“Is that how you met Mr. Harker? In Afghanistan?”

I nodded again. “He got hurt. I treated him until medevac arrived.”

“He got hurt.”

“Constable, I’m not sure if the particulars have been declassified yet, and I know Nick wouldn’t want me to violate the Official Secrets Act so soon after arriving in London. He’d insist I wait at least an hour.”

I gave a weak smile, and she answered with a small laugh. Not a bad one, really. “May I ask a question?”

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“You’ve been asking a lot of them so far. Why stop now?”

She shook her head. “No, no — I’ve done what I’ve been told, talked to you, gotten a sense you’re in your right mind and warned you about any misconduct. This is just my own personal interest.”

I thought about that for a few seconds. “Go ahead.”

“Is that part of what drives you? Your ... experiences with your friend?”

I shook my head no. “Not really. There’s all kinds of stuff that you can’t let go of, you know. Friends you lose, lives taken, fear and stress and all those things, sure. But sometimes, not often but sometimes, you get to do the right thing. The moral thing. You get to act like the man you always thought you could someday be. And when you're doing something like that... that stuff doesn’t wind up driving you, constable. That stuff heals you. You never have nightmares about that. What I did for Nick was gory and unpleasant, but I can honestly tell you the memory has never plagued me. There are a lot of things I just can’t let go of, but that’s not one of them.”

“It heals you,” she repeated.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

She reached for her wallet, opened it up and fished out a business card. She set it down on the table and slid it across to me. “Welcome to London, Mr. Holloway. And please accept my sympathies about your friend’s death.”

“Friend’s murder,” I said as I picked up the card. “It’s not like cancer caught up with him. Someone knifed him.”

“It’s a euphemism, I admit.”

I rose from my seat and moved over towards the door. Constable Lawson made no effort to stop me. “All that I’ve seen, constable, I think maybe I can handle it without the euphemisms,” I told her. “But — thank you.”

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Chapter 6

Lord Nelson was mocking me.

Years ago while I was doing refresher training with British forces I wound up sharing lunch with a Combat Medical Technician named — Rourke, I think it was. In between complaining about the food and talking about who was banging who, he declared that Trafalgar Square should be the Hajj of the British Combat Medical Technician. After all, what better icon to the medical corps than a man who survived having one arm, one eye and one ball blown off, and was patched up and sent back to combat? Lord Nelson, Rourke declared, was testament to what the rest of the military could do if only we did our jobs.

So here I was, making a long-overdue pilgrimage to Nelson's Column. Like most pilgrimages it wasn't quite what I was expecting. In my mind's eye it wasn't swarmed with tourists and everything that goes with tourist spots: crowded roads running right alongside the Square, red double-deckers with diesel engines, cabs and tour groups and every other damned thing imaginable. In reality it had those things in spades. To boot, Lord Nelson's Column is so damned tall that you can hardly see Nelson himself from anywhere nearby.

I wound up sitting on the high steps of the National Gallery, armed with an empty notebook, a laptop bag, and a sandwich I'd purchased from a shop just outside the Charing Cross station. Distance and elevation let me look at Lord Nelson properly —

— well, would have, if he were pointed in the right direction. Lord Nelson expressed his disdain by turning his back on me.

“Yeah,” I told him. “I get it. And we're real sorry we saved your other ball.” There was a silent *asshole* added to it and I shook my head angrily.

“I'm sorry?” someone passing me on his way up the stairs asked. I shook my head no, waved him off, and he didn't even pause.

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I sat there for a moment eating my sandwich and chips — crisps, I guess I should call them — and thinking about Rourke, about Bagram, about Kandahar, about Madman and Hicks and Rugby and Paladin and everything else, anything else, in order to avoid thinking about what I needed to think about. But eventually the sandwich ran out, followed by the crisps, and that left me stuffing plastic food wrappers into my satchel and turning to a fresh page in my notebook.

Rugby's murder, I printed at the top. Beneath it, *Master Task List*. In no particular order I listed:

- *Find who killed Rugby*
- *Find out why he (she?) killed Rugby*
- *Find out why Madman's missing*
- *Find out why Madman hasn't surfaced*
- *Attend Rugby's funeral*
- *Find out when Rugby's funeral is — call Lawson?*
- *Call Paladin*
- *Find out whatever happened to Rourke, see if he wants to get together*

As far as task lists go this wasn't entirely contemptible. Optimistic, maybe. I reviewed them, looked at them, tried to figure out what I wasn't paying attention to which would bite me in the ass if I ignored. After a few minutes' review I added,

- *Find cheap food/shelter/electricity*
- *Find wifi*
- *Don't get arrested*
- *Develop local contacts for intelligence and resources*

And, after a pause,

- *Figure out why Elaine left me*

I was pretty sure that last one was going to be a bitch.

Some tasks lend themselves to resolving other tasks. "Efficiency is the hallmark of

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good emergency medicine,” I mumbled as I opened my laptop and — yes, the National Gallery was offering wifi, but no, it wasn’t free. Museums are the same all over the world: in an era of ever-tightening budgets they insist on squeezing every possible penny (uh, shilling?) from their patrons — especially well-heeled foreign tourists who had money to spend.

Screw it. I reached for my phone and had a moment of panic: it wasn’t there, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had it. I —

It’s strange, you know? I was in a friendly country surrounded by people who would venerate me as a hero for serving as a medic with the Artists Rifles, and yet the knowledge that I was alone, virtually out of money, that I had no place to sleep, to rest, to recharge my laptop, all of that filled me with dread as if someone had ordered me back to Afghanistan. My heart pounded and I could hear my blood hum. Some people are born with a physical defect that lets them hear their blood move through the jugular, but really, anyone can if your heart races fast enough. Paladin called it the Blood Music, because that song tended to only come up in combat and —

I took several breaths and tucked my head between my knees. I wound up rocking myself there on the steps like some autistic child, just trying to reassure myself and make the surge of fear and adrenaline cease. *Stop*, I told myself firmly. *Friendlylies present. Friendlylies present.*

Sometimes that lasts for a few seconds, sometimes a few minutes. Sometimes more. How long it lasted this time doesn’t really matter so much as the fact that I didn’t lose it in the middle of Trafalgar Square.

Once that fear subsided an entirely new fear gripped me: I was operating without a psychological support network for the first time in years. The McKennas were an ocean away, Elaine wanted nothing to do with me and I couldn’t even call the VA because like an idiot I lost my phone.

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If I lost it here — and I'd already been close with Lawson — there wasn't going to be anyone to help limit the damage.

Sucks to be me.

* * * * *

One of the best things to do when you're scared is to achieve something. Just the act of crossing something off a list can give you back the illusion of control. Hold onto that illusion hard enough and maybe you can get some real control out of it. So, my hands shaking from the stress of coming off an adrenaline surge, I opened up my laptop again and shelled out some money I barely had for wifi.

One internet-routed telephone call later, a phone in North Carolina began to ring. A few seconds later a familiar voice answered. "McKennas."

I grimaced. "Hey, Bird."

"It's *Libby*." She put all of a teenager's scorn into it. Good grief, but she was sounding like her mother nowadays. "Where are you, Uncle Chris? I can barely hear you."

"Trafalgar Square. It's really busy, buses and tourists and every—"

"I've been to Trafalgar Square, Uncle Chris."

"Uh—"

"We didn't move to North Carolina until I was *ten*. Of course I know Trafalgar Square. It's right off Charing Cross."

"Libbyhoney, listen, I'm sorry that I forgot you're British, all—"

"*English*. I'm an English expatriate. Dad says so."

"Libby, you're a natural-born American citizen, your mom's from New Jersey—"

"So what?"

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I took a deep breath and reminded myself that this was a good thing. Dealing with a recalcitrant teenager is the sort of thing that's supposed to vex you. Panic attacks from being out in public are not. "Libby, please. Why are you doing this? What did I do to piss you off?"

She burst out in a peal of laughter. "Nothing!"

Nothing. She was positively cheerful. I blinked.

"It's a woman's prerogative to be mercurial. And you can't hold it against me, Uncle Chris." *Cheerful* got upgraded to *ebullient*.

I was stunned for a moment. "What the hell, Libby?"

That brought her to silence. "I'm sorry," she said later, her voice now fraught with uncertainty. "I just thought—"

I gave her several seconds to finish it, but she didn't. So I did. "Honey, it's okay. Yeah, playing with men is a long, time-honored past time of women. But you need to think long and hard about doing it with a guy who's, uh—"

Now it was my turn to trail off, and her turn to give me several seconds to finish. I didn't, so she did. "Do you want to talk to Mom?" she asked uncertainly.

I put my head in my hands for a moment before talking again to the laptop microphone. "I don't know. I'm kind of stalling on that, to be honest."

"Do you want to know about your phone calls?"

I blinked. "I left my phone there?"

"After your call with She Who Will No Longer Be Named, yeah."

"Libby, she's not Voldemort. Show a little respect."

"She hurt you, Uncle Chris."

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“Yeah, and I’m sure I’m not innocent, either. Please. Don’t. She was very kind to you and your sister. Can you focus on that?”

“No.” She sighed melodramatically. “Fine. I’ll try to be nice. You left your phone here after your talk with Elaine.”

I was only dimly aware of that conversation. It occupied some weird corner of my mind where I knew that I hadn’t forgotten it so much as I was choosing not to remember that. I do that, sometimes, for things that stress me out. It’s part of the PTSD package and a really annoying one, to boot. Explains why I didn’t know where my phone was: I’d completely not-remembered the talk with Elaine.

“Have there been calls, Libby?”

“I don’t know. Yes. But I don’t know from who. Your phone is locked.”

“From *whom*. If you’re going to do the Superior English Git thing, you need to have impeccable grammar.”

I was rewarded with a brief chuckle of delighted amusement. “Yes, but I don’t know from whom, you silly Colonial.”

I found myself grinning despite myself. “Well, punch in 1-0-1-7 and tell me, all right?”

She must’ve had my phone right nearby. “Uh — a lot of ‘Number Unavailable’s. I usually see those on international calls, Uncle Chris. Starting two days ago and running up to a little bit ago.”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see it. “Okay. If it goes off again, please answer for me and take a message, all right?”

“Sure. Does that mean you’re going to be checking in here regularly?”

“Kind of depends on how my conversation with your mom goes.”

“She’s out on the porch. Want me to get her?”

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“Your dad, please. I don’t think I’m ready to talk to your mom—”

She interrupted me by hollering loudly, “Mom! Chris is on the phone!”

I winced. A moment later I heard Bird take the phone from Libby.

“Chris.” Bird sounded cautious, as if she were speaking to a stick of sweating dynamite. For a moment I was angry about that, but really, could I blame her?

“Hey, Bird.” I didn’t really know what to say next, so I stalled with, “Do you have a minute?”

Her voice could have been Libby’s, but wasn’t. “Yes.”

“I’m in Trafalgar Square right now. Sorry about the background noise. Uh — I left my phone with you guys apparently, so I’m without a reliable way of contacting you. Or anyone, really, I guess.”

“‘Communications fail the moment they’re needed,’ or so my husband tells me.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway. Uh — Bird, I, uh —” There were, are, so many things I needed to say but I couldn’t even make them come up on my internal dialogue. So I said things that didn’t need to be said instead. “Can you call the club and find out about Rugby’s funeral — you know, where it is, what funeral home, things like that? I’ve got this constable who’s willing to help me out on that score but really, the less I talk to her the happier I think everyone will be.”

She was silent for a moment. “What, you didn’t get Sean’s emails?”

“Uh — when did he send them?”

“Maybe six hours ago.”

I sighed. “I ... deleted them without reading them.”

“Well, why did you do *that*, you silly person?”

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“It made sense at the time.”

She didn’t ask me to explain. “He already called the club for you. You’re not a member but they’ll cut you a little slack. Some of Artists Rifles will be meeting at the club tomorrow morning at ten; the service is at noon at St. Paul’s, just a stone’s throw from the club. Rugby’s body will be received at the church first thing tomorrow morning: some of the Regiment will be there to welcome him. And a wake afterwards at the club, which you’re welcome to attend.”

“I don’t have a suit. I don’t even have a blazer.”

“They don’t care.”

I blinked. A proper English gentlemen’s club that would let me in the door without wearing a thousand dollars of custom tailoring? “Paladin must’ve faxed them his CGC,” I quipped.

“No. He told them you were the one who kept him alive after that awful — after the Unpleasantness. The club held an immediate meeting and voted unanimously to waive their dress code for twenty-four hours. Sean says it’s hardly without precedent.”

“For someone who’s not part of the special-warfare community, it is—”

“Chris.” Her voice was abruptly very flat, very calm, very even. It was Colour Sergeant McKenna’s tone in the voice of his wife. “Chris, yes, the SAS community can be as insular and cliquish as any high school, and yes, they can be petty and ungrateful. But their wives, Chris... the wives of the SAS know the score. We count every new scar on our beloved’s body. We put on a good face and joke about how the Regiment is now giving decorations for shaving nicks, all the while we scream inside about the litany of injuries written in their flesh. They think the coming-home sex is just our eagerness to enjoy their fine, fit bodies and maybe thankfulness they’re home safe. They don’t think that a good half of it is that they’ve had months to deal with their injuries, and we’ve just seen it for the first time, and we’re so acutely aware of what a close thing it was and the only thing

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we want to do is—”

Her voice caught. She wasn't talking about some abstract wife. She was speaking from personal experience. In my mind's eye I saw tears leaking from her eyes, her brushing them away with the back of her wrist. I kept silent and gave her time to recover her composure. She'd have done the same for me.

“And when it's all over, Chris, when the orgasm's spent and the bodies have failed and two souls are collapsed against each other... we hate you, Chris. Oh God do we hate you. You're the one who sews our lovers up to take the field again. How dare you. We're the ones who took a vow in sickness and in health, but you get to be the one to hold their hands when they're broken and bleeding. You've taken our job. How dare you. Everything about you is carrion and death and we hate you, we hate the Regiment, we hate the Army, we hate everything. And in the midst of all that hate we realize how grateful we are to you. How much we love you. And how much worse our lives would be without you. My Sean has burns that will never heal and his beautiful face will never again be seen. Kestrel barely remembers her father's face. But my Sean came home alive and with his soul intact, Chris, and to the end of my days I think my biggest regret will be not having a sister I can push into marrying you.”

I blinked, I listened, I thought. She was telling me something, yes, but — no, she was telling me things, plural, and I had to be sharp enough to figure it out because she wasn't going to help me. She was doing me enough of a favor just by putting it out there.

“Bird, you said that Paladin talked to the Special Forces Club and they held a vote, right?”

I could almost hear her nod.

I thought some more about it. “You've already put word out to the Regiment's wives,” I told her. It wasn't a question. “The fix was in before Paladin ever talked to the Club. The vote was a formality to solemnize a decision that had already been made. Each Club

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member voted the way you prepared them to vote. Each individual thinks that sure, maybe he's voting this way so he can tell his wife he did as she wished, but of course the others aren't doing that. And so the wives have subverted the Club without the Club being the wiser."

There was something very much like laughter at the other end of the line. "There, you see? My darling, dearly-loved man. Do you see?"

I shook my head, even though she couldn't see it. "Not yet."

"Think," she quietly urged. "More than that, *feel*. It's important."

I couldn't decide if she was being infuriatingly vague or was answering a question I'd phrased so poorly I wasn't ready to understand the answer. I took a long breath, sighed, and sat still on the steps for a few moments. It took me almost a minute before I spoke next.

"Was Rugby married, Bird?"

"He was your friend. Was he?"

"Not as of three years ago. But I lost touch. I hadn't heard of anything, but... he could've, I guess."

"Moira. Married ten months, just entered her second trimester."

"Moira," I sighed. "Christ. You'd think the press would have mentioned that." For a moment I turned the thought over, following it up with, "The press would have mentioned it. Someone would have, some outlet. So for *no* outlet to have reported it there has to be some kind of intervention. The police asked the press not to publish details. Why?"

"That sounds like a question for your police contact."

I scowled pointlessly. "She's not going to reveal private police information, Bird."

"True," she agreed amicably.

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I shook my head. “Add that to the mystery list.” My pen scratched out two new entries on the Master Task List: *Meet Moira, give regards* and *Find out why information is getting suppressed*.

Don't think. Feel, my inner dialogue told me.

As I sat there thinking, I was vaguely aware of Bird making a softly supportive noise.

“The wives are organized,” I said quietly. “Organized enough that you can subvert Club votes to get me in the door. But you’re not doing this for me. You’re doing this for Moira. You all think that if I can dig around a little bit it will be in your best interests. But why? The police are already deep into this.”

“Enough,” Bird said. “You passed.”

“I passed?”

“When I told Moira how you and Sean saw things, that the Met was chasing down an incorrect theory and it would take them a couple of weeks to turn around, she almost lost it. Her husband’s dead and his murderer’s running free. It would be enough to rattle anyone. So when you hopped the flight to London... I put word out that you were coming, that you were a medic with Artists Rifles for a while and that you’re now a police officer in Virginia. There was some concern about your PTSD, and about your lack of experience with a homicide investigation.”

“Yeah. I’m the last person I’d want investigating this, too.”

“But you’re the one we have. So we decided that we’d give you the in with the Club, see how that went. We were hoping to see a sign you were on the ball and figuring things out. Figuring out that we can swing Club votes... realizing you’d overlooked the possibility of Nick having a wife... seeing the police are asking the press to not talk about Moira’s existence... it’ll do, I think.”

“So that’s what that heart-wrenching show of pathos was a bit ago?” I asked. “That

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was what, an audition?”

“No,” she answered, “and yes. And it was something that needed to be said. And something you needed to hear. It served a lot of purposes, Chris. One of them being to remind you just how much I love you.” There was no spin on the answer, no gloss. Simple, matter-of-fact.

Honest.

Bird loves me.

Relief crashed into me like a wave. I hadn’t truly understood how tightly I’d wrapped myself around my own axle until she said those few words and I got to unwind a few turns. For a few seconds I couldn’t do anything at all: even breathing was too much effort.

My fingers fumbled for my pen. I drew a shaky line through *Develop local contacts for intelligence and resources*, annotated it with *Special Forces Club* and *The Wifely Cabal*, and added a new task of *Stop being a dumbshit*.

“Chris, are you there?”

“I am.”

“You need money. I’ve put a couple of hundred bucks in your account through PayPal, but I don’t know when it will be available.”

How did she know I — oh. “You talked to Elaine.”

I swear, I could almost hear her nod. “I promised you I would.”

My tongue felt dead as I asked, “How did that go?”

There was an equally dead pause before Bird answered, “Not well. She’s emptied your account. Said something about you tapping it.”

I really didn’t know how to answer that, so I didn’t.

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“If you need money, Chris, we can do that. We have an emergency fund — the wives, I mean, not the Hawk’s Nest — and we can get you money in a few hours.”

I really didn’t know how to answer that through a haze of tears, so I didn’t.

“I’ll arrange it. Where should I send it to? Where are you staying?”

It took everything I could to keep my voice steady. “I don’t have a place yet. I’m flat broke and I’m in one of the world’s most expensive cities, Bird, I don’t know how I’m going to pay for a hotel, or even a youth hostel, or—”

“St. Paul’s Church, Knightsbridge,” she said simply.

I did a double-take. “What?”

“You’re a traveler paying his final respects to an old friend, who has found himself in a foreign city and down on his luck. I’m pretty sure the Bible has something to say about that, and I suspect St. Paul’s will be happy to live up to their beliefs.”

I made a faint hehing noise. “That so, huh?”

“Hebrews 13:2, ‘Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.’ 1 Peter 4:9, ‘Use hospitality one to another without grudging.’ Leviticus 19:34, ‘But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.’”

I sat there in stunned silence.

She followed it up with, “And I’m pretty sure the priest in residence there could come up with a lot more citations for you.”

“I always thought you were an atheist, Anne.” That should tell you how surprised I was: I used her given name.

“I am. But if I’m going to condemn the brutality and excess of Christianity, fairness

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requires me to learn about its humanity and kindness, too, don't you think? And let's face it: as a moderately well-mannered white male, it isn't as if it's hard for most people to find charity in their hearts towards you."

I sat there mute. Had I not been sitting down on the steps of the National Gallery, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Whether this was over the revelation that Bird the Dawkinsite was an actual Biblical scholar, or over the news that I'd have a place to stay and meals to eat, or over the fact I was apparently in the employ of a shadowy cabal of Special Forces wives who were even sneakier than their husbands, I have no idea.

"I'll deliver it to you courtesy of St. Paul's," Bird said quietly. "It's got to be approaching dinnertime over there, Chris."

"Is," I managed to get out.

"Go to St. Paul's," she quietly urged. "They'll put you up for the night. You'll get some cash in the morning. You'll have a place to shower before the funeral. Things will be all right, Chris. Just go to St. Paul's before they close."

"Will," I managed to say. Something in my head was turning things over: if Rugby's body was being delivered to St. Paul's in the morning, that meant right now he was lying on a slab somewhere in a funeral home. If I could find it, maybe I could see his injuries before the mortician's craft was finis—

"And just so you're not taken by surprise," Bird continued, her voice gentle and quiet, "Elaine's on a flight out there right now. She's going to the funeral with you. She said something about how no one should have to attend a friend's funeral alone."

I swear I didn't say anything. I must've made a strangled noise or something, though, because I upset Bird's delivery.

"Chris, I promised you I'd speak to her. The good news is she still loves you. The bad news is that's just not enough for her any more. But she loves you. And she's not going to let you go through this alone."

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“That’s — listen, I’m not — *how in the world is this a good idea?!*”

Irony and amusement ran through her voice. “Although I agree with your sentiment, Chris, it’s a very us thing to do. She doesn’t even know about the Andromache and she’s already acting like a member.”

“The Andromache?”

“Yeah. What you’re calling ‘the wives.’ I’m not just ‘a wife,’ Chris. I’m the badass, conspiracy-minded, vicious razorchick who happens to be married to Hector. I’m the girl all the guys want but only Hector deserves. My Hector keeps me on my toes and gives me the whole of his heart. I give my Hector the whole of my heart and I watch his back. I’m Andromache. Every SAS wife is her. And let me tell you, Chris, Elaine would make one hell of an Andromache.”

“I’m not SAS,” I reminded her. “I never was.”

“Whatever you say, Hector. But your Andromache is arriving soon.”

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